

# DG INSIGHTS

## DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE INSIGHTS

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**Ajay Chhibber**

UN Assistant  
Secretary-General and  
UNDP Regional  
Director for Asia and  
the Pacific

### About DG Insights

**DG Insights**, an online publication for the Democratic Governance Community of Practice, seeks to highlight emerging trends and substantive issues UNDP/UN practitioners and the larger research community are grappling with and to promote deeper understanding on democracy and democratic governance. We are inviting network members with pertinent experiences and/or thematic expertise on specific topics to contribute to **DG Insights** at [dgp-net@groups.undp.org](mailto:dgp-net@groups.undp.org)

**Note:** **DG Insights** are network members' contributions and do not necessarily represent the views of UNDP.

## 'Differently Democratic' Green Shoots Show Promise

The seeds of democracy have been sown in much of Asia and green shoots can be seen across the region. Today there are democratically elected governments in all eight countries of South Asia and many in Southeast Asia. The region stands at a crossroads. Some are young democracies like Bhutan and the Maldives, others like Afghanistan, Nepal and Timor-Leste are emerging from decades of conflict, and some have opted for democracy over military rule, like Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh. These countries have a choice. They can deepen the roots of democracy or slip back into old ways.

Democracy is a continuous process that does not end with elections. Free and fair elections are but a first step. They go hand in hand with efforts to provide opportunities for people's voices to be heard and to participate in decisions that affect their everyday lives; for the rule of law to be applied equally and to ensure access to justice for all; and for greater accountability and inclusiveness.

Asia has the promise of democracy but also the challenge of poverty - one-third of the world's poor live in Asia. Natural disasters also strike with unfailing regularity across Asia. In the past couple of weeks the region has faced a spate of disasters with devastating impact - earthquakes in Bhutan, Indonesia, Samoa and Tonga, followed by a tsunami in Samoa and Tonga, a typhoon and floods in the Philippines, and floods in India. The region also faces several other daunting challenges - the global economic downturn, climate change and high levels of inequality.

Experience has shown that if governments are not responsive to the needs of the people they will turn against them. We witnessed, for example, the dramatic downfall of the Suharto regime in Indonesia following the financial crisis of 1997. Similarly, widespread corruption, which can have devastating consequences for the poorest, has prepared the ground for military forces to overthrow elected governments in the name of the people in some Asian countries - for example in Thailand in 2006 and in Bangladesh in 2007. Afghanistan too is at risk, where allegations of corruption - whether substantiated or not - provide additional fuel for the continued insurgency of the Taliban.

Corruption can undermine the efforts of governments to deliver services to the people. Electoral democracies are not fulfilling their promise if the government is mired in corruption. Anti-corruption policies are an essential ingredient of any attempt to deepen democracy - actions that are not biased towards attacking political opponents or catching only the small fish. But prevention is better than cure. An open and transparent environment, with laws and regulations in place that guarantee people's access to information and to seek redress, so that the public can hold their leaders accountable, are even more important.

Deepening democracy is the answer to a more effective and responsive government. All the main democratic institutions - the government, the parliament and judiciary - need to meet the people's needs in order to deepen democracy. Defining the roles and responsibilities of all levels of government, bringing the governing institutions as close as possible to the people - through decentralization and devolution of power - to make them accountable to the people, are vital.

But the delivery of services may be compromised unless the rule of law is strictly applied with effective, independent and honest judges upholding the rights of their fellow-citizens, and members of parliament providing adequate oversight over the government's functioning.

In some Asian countries the judiciary has played a remarkable role in defending the rights of its citizens, for example in Pakistan, where the lawyers and judges took to the streets; or in India, where the judiciary is renowned for upholding economic, social and cultural rights. In other countries more effort is still needed to ensure the full independence of the judiciary. The same can be said about the institution of parliament, which needs to be strong to provide an adequate counter-balance to the executive.

Democracy in Asia also faces the challenge of inclusion, which calls upon countries to apply the basic principles of democracy to all regions, social groups and sectors. Representation of the poor, women, marginal castes and ethnic communities, protection of minorities, and bringing government to the poor remain problematic.

Another challenge is to deepen democracy and to take it beyond the elites. In many countries political processes are largely for the elite. The challenge is to take public policy-making to the people whose very lives are affected by these policy decisions.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, "In a true democracy every man or woman is taught to think for himself or herself. The spirit of democracy cannot be imposed from without, it must come from within."

Bhutan, one of the youngest democracies in the world, has taken a bold step in bringing together its South Asian neighbors, and countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Mongolia, Burma and Vietnam to learn from each others' experiences and to spread the seeds of democracy wider.

In early October 2009, over 100 representatives from a dozen Asian countries met in Paro, Bhutan along with scholars, experts and civil society leaders. The United Nations Development Programme joined hands with the government of Bhutan to enrich the dialogue on democracy by bringing experts, scholars, civil society partners from the region and beyond.

The experience in Asia demonstrates that democracy is a quest and a struggle. Because the type of democracy a nation chooses to develop depends on its history and circumstances, countries will necessarily be "differently democratic". But democracy is about more than a single decision to hold elections. It requires a deeper process of political development to embed democratic values and culture in all parts of society - a process never formally completed.

Asia, with its long and rich tradition, is well-positioned to take on its own path. It is also home to four of the world's largest democracies: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia and Pakistan. A clear consensus for democracy is emerging across Asia with democratically elected governments in all South Asian countries and most of Southeast Asia.

The question now is: how will they be sustained and strengthened for the ultimate benefit of the people? Either democracy will thrive and deliver benefits for the people in terms of human development, or it will wane and wither with the neglect of its people. The question now is: what path will Asia take?

The decision is up to the governments and the peoples of Asia. While the seeds of democracy have taken root they must now be nurtured to survive, grow and flourish.

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**Note: Note:** This OpEd piece was originally published in The Bangkok Post on 13 October 2009, also to mark the International Conference on 'Deepening and Sustaining Democracy in Asia' held in Bhutan.

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